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Book Review

What is Cultural Translation?

by Sarah Maitland

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 192 pages. Paper $33.95. ISBN 978-1472526274.

Reviewed by Dick Kroneman

The term "cultural translation"—first introduced by the anthropologist Roger Keesing (1985)—refers to a growing field of study among anthropologists and other social scientists. This field of study is understood as being much broader than just the interlingual translation of texts performed by professional translators. Cultural translation is about what people do, or are supposed to do, in order to understand and accept other people and other cultures in the broadest sense of the word. According to Maitland, cultural translation of the traditions, inscriptions, and institutions of culture and society is urgently needed in today's world where different ideologies, different modes of being, and different modes of living and acting are becoming more and more visible and often lead to division and conflict (*Preface*, i). The insights of cultural translation can help to overcome these social and political problems. But, ultimately, "cultural translation" is about understanding ourselves and developing ourselves by interacting with others, who are "different."

Cultural translation, as presented by Maitland, is based on the assumption that various cultures are "different" from one another and that their meanings cannot be comprehended by others. It is therefore impossible to transfer meanings of the text-for-translation into the translation. The source text is a foreign country as its meanings are no longer accessible due to the changes in time, place, and culture. Meaning is not found in the text (or culture), or behind the text (in the author's intention), but it is constructed in front of the text in the mind of the reader-translator based on the meaning potential that is projected by the text. In the process of translation, meaning is *not carried across* from one language to another. It is rather *created* by the reader-translator who interacts with the text-for-translation. "When pen meets page, the resulting translation reveals more about the translator's own subjectivity than the reality of the translation's object itself" (159). All translation—including linguistic interlingual translation—means interpretation, mediation, and transformation of meaning.

Maitland's book on cultural translation is actually more a textbook on hermeneutics than a treatise on translation. Her interpretation of cultural translation is mainly based on Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy. Within this general framework, she also discusses insights from a wide range of other scholars, including Benjamin, Bhabha, Dawkins, Keesing, Pym, Rorty, and Steiner.

Maitland distinguishes five aspects in the process of interpretation and cultural translation: 1. Interpretation; 2. Distanciation; 3. Incorporation; 4. Transformation; and 5. Emancipation. Each aspect is discussed in a separate chapter in her book. These chapters are preceded by an introduction, in which the author discusses the history and the meaning of the concept of "cultural translation." The book closes with a brief conclusion about the significance of cultural translation.

Maitland's proposal overlaps to some degree with Steiner's four hermeneutic movements (trust, aggression, incorporation, and retribution). While interacting with Steiner's hermeneutic movements, Maitland comes up with her own Ricoerian version of the process of translation.

Like Steiner, Maitland views the process of translation as a journey from the here and now back to the there and then of the original text, followed by a return trip to the here and now of the context of the reader-translator. The reader-translator constantly moves back and forth between the text-to-be-translated, his own understanding, and the audience he translates for. In this dynamic, dialectical process of reaching back and forward, the reader-translator grows in his understanding of the text and his understanding of himself. And somewhere during this ongoing process of distanciation and incorporation, translation takes place. Maitland uses the geometrical figure of the lemniscate (two loops that meet at a central point; like the symbol 8 resting on its side) to visualize the constant moving back and forward between the text-for-translation and the audience for whom the translation is intended.

Maitland uses the helpful metaphor of "map" to clarify the relation between a translation and its underlying text-for-translation. A translation differs from its source text just like a map differs from the territory it maps. Translations, like maps, always involve interpretation. Both are intended to "conquer a remoteness" (95). But this remoteness is actually never really bridged in translation. This is also articulated by Maitland's use of the Ricoerian metaphor of "hospitality": Translation is an ethical model for the hospitality of otherness. It is an empathetic gesture and movement, "not by which we would claim to 'understand' the other, but by which we would acknowledge them precisely as bearers of that which we do *not* understand" (5).

While reading Maitland's monograph, I experienced both distanciation and appropriation. On the one hand, I empathize with Maitland's (and other modern hermeneuts') focus on the other-ness of texts and on the limitations that readers-translators experience while trying to understand foreign texts, especially those that come from ancient cultures that are very different from our own. There will always remain dimensions of meaning that escape our attention and comprehension. On the other hand, it seems to me that Maitland strongly exaggerates this difference. Take, for example, the ancient parable of the prodigal son in any English version of the Greek New Testament (Luke 15). Modern readers will no doubt read this parable from their own historical and cultural context. But this does not prevent them from being able to—at least approximately—figure out the plot of the story, the attitudes and intentions of the characters in the story, and the intended meaning of the parable. It is true that texts (and translations) often receive a life of their own when they function in a different cultural context. It is also true that the authors of ancient texts are no longer available to explain the meaning and the purpose of this parable. But readers-translators can often make pretty good plausible guesses as to what the intended meaning and purpose of the parable is by looking at the wider framework (context) in which this parable is presented and by taking note of what the main point of view character (the father) says at the end of the story. In other words: Texts themselves contain many clues—some more explicit than others—as to what the intended meanings of the texts are.

Maitland is definitely right when she says that every translation bears the traces of its translators and that no translation is "final." There is actually a lot of empirical evidence that points in this direction. Bible translations in English, for example, show quite a bit of variation in the way the ancient texts of the Old and New Testament have been translated. Nevertheless, there is also quite a bit of sameness and similarity in terms of the meanings that are communicated in these translations.

I very much agree with Maitland's point that reading and translating are not just a matter of interpreting texts that are "different," but also have a lot to do with understanding ourselves and our own being in the world. This also applies to the interpretation of Biblical texts and to their interlingual translations in Bible translation, teaching, preaching, and personal reflections. In order to do justice to the "otherness" of these texts and in order to keep our own ideological biases in check, it is important that we resist the temptation to overly domesticate the content of these texts when we read, interpret, translate, and apply these texts to our own lives. The main point of Biblical texts (and their translations) in particular is not only to affirm that which we already know and believe, but to also set us into motion to learn more about the truth while interacting with people and texts that are different from ourselves.

Maitland's book reflects a more general trend in hermeneutics and in translation studies: Since the cultural turn in translation studies, a primarily source text based approach has been replaced by a more receptor oriented approach to translation. It seems to me that this kind of approach easily leads to a position that views translation as a mere response to the stimulus of the source text. Unlike postmodern philosophers, Maitland—following Ricoeur—tries to salvage the objectivity of the text by acknowledging that texts divorced from authorial intent still refer to "something" in the world outside the text, and by postulating that meanings created and translated by translators belong to the meaning potential of the text (79–80). I find this argumentation not very convincing, since it can be argued that the meaning potential of the text is not a property of the text. It is rather determined by the interaction between the reader-translator and the text-for-translation. Given the wide variety of readers-translators from different cultures and traditions and with different perspectives and ideological agendas, meaning potential is in principle infinite, without any limits, unless there are some clear and commonly shared criteria that help to distinguish between valid and invalid interpretations.

I applaud Maitland's proposal to use "cultural translation" as a means of overcoming ideological, social, and political barriers. At the same time, Maitland's own cultural relativism may form an obstacle for readers who disagree with her philosophical position. Her suggestion that we cannot really know or understand the meaning of a text ("the text remains ever-distant, forever progressing away from the reader's grasp"; p. 81) sounds actually pretty dogmatic and objectivistic. I would rather say that intelligent readers can in principle know the meanings and intentions expressed in (foreign) texts, but that our human capacity to fully grasp these meanings and intentions is limited. This implies that we need to be very careful about making truth claims that go beyond the texts that we are reading. In addition, we need to dialogue (more) with one another regarding criteria and processes that help to validate proposed interpretations of the text.

This book is an excellent introduction to the hermeneutics of contemporary "cultural translation." I recommend this book for translation scholars and translation practitioners who are interested in learning more about the possible implications of Ricoerian hermeneutics for the theory and practice of translation. Readers who are mainly interested in a more practical guide to cultural translation would do better to read David Katan's (1999, 2004, 2014) *Translating Cultures. An Introduction for Translators, Interpreters and Mediators* instead.